

These Boots Were Made for Walking (Football) by Greg Potts

Are competitions putting off recreational walking footballers for whom the game has so many health benefits?

Anyone familiar with the inside of a dressing room will know, if you turn up to your first session after Christmas in a brand spanking new tracksuit you can expect a fair bit of banter.

“The wife buy you that for Christmas?”

“Wow, that colour’s brave.”

One player’s arrival in a bright red Adidas number has set everyone off this morning.

But something is slightly different here from your average group of football lads. Most of these guys are thinking about pensions rather than Porsches. The majority of them had not played the game they love for at least 20 years until recently.

I am spending the morning with Salisbury FC Walking Football, playing the gentle version of the beautiful game, designed to keep over 50s active while reducing the risk of injury.

Invented in 2011 by the Chesterfield FC Community Trust, there has been nothing slow about the sport’s stratospheric rise in popularity. In fact, the online directory Walking Football United now has details of 946 clubs in England alone.

Inevitably, the FA jumped on the bandwagon, adding walking football to its People’s Cup competition in 2015. This gives amateur players the chance to play finals at the home of the national teams, St. George’s Park.

However, with applications for the 2018 tournament open now, not everyone will be lacing up to play. Many believe that adding a competitive element to the sport is changing the image of the game and excluding potential recreational players.

“We only do this for the camaraderie and to bring our dreams back. Every time I’m on the pitch I think I’m at Wembley,” says Salisbury player and former chef Jeff Maund.

“I think the FA should stay out of the game, it’ll take the fun out of it and put people off.”

Even the Wiltshire FA’s own football development officer has doubts over the popularity of the national organisation’s competition.

Chloe Buller said: “The publicity from the People’s Cup is great but I think the impact the game is having socially and physically on people is better shown at a recreational level.

“We have around 400 players in Wiltshire and I think maybe only 20 or 30 would participate in tournaments or the People’s Cup.”

In the world of walking football though, not everyone has the same opinion. Terry Rice is the founder of the biggest competition in the UK, the TRA National Walking Football League, which kicked off in November 2017 with 16 teams from across the country.

“I don’t think the league puts people off playing the sport,” says Rice.

“These guys might be older but they still want to be the best and this gives them that chance, as does the FA People’s Cup. I’m also head scout for the brand new England national walking football team and players want that chance to represent their country.”

Many are wary though that if the competitive national league overtakes the current, inclusive image of the sport, potential players may decide it is too advanced for them, despite its invention as a way of improving the mental and physical health of older people.

“One of the first things that people said to me when we started walking football in Wiltshire was ‘you’ve got to pretend that everyone’s your granddad or your grandmother’, you have to behave in a way that’s appropriate for the game,” says Buller.

“I can see that there is a demand for competition. Obviously that’s where the national league has picked up where the FA has not taken a strong hold, but we need people to understand that there is a non-competitive, recreational version too.”

This is a focus that is shared by my club for the day Salisbury FC, who have around 50 members and regularly get over 20 players at each of their twice weekly sessions.

During the five and six-a-side matches there is a strict no contact rule and when a player does go down on the hard sports hall floor, the game is halted immediately to check they are okay.

Their website states: “The key focus of the group is to enjoy playing and socialising at our sessions.

“We do not play in any league and have not generally emphasised that side of the game - we like to play for fun.”

Brian Crabtree is another Salisbury player who appreciates the club’s stance on playing competitively.

“There are competitions, like the People’s Cup, that if we do want to enter a team, great. But I don’t want to play competitively,” he says.

“When you get older and you’ve lost all your mates because they’ve all got married or some of them at this stage have snuffed it, actually finding another group of mates like you used to have at school or university is quite difficult, so this is just a really good social opportunity.

“What happens out on the pitch is just extra interest.”

As the morning's session draws to a close, I am drafted in to the team in purple bibs to make up the numbers. I think some of the lads may have noticed I am 21, just the 29 years under the minimum age limit.

This may not be a People's Cup match, or any form of competitive game for that matter, but it's clear that pride is at stake here.

5 minutes into the game my heart rate is up and I am misplacing passes all over the place. I have made the excuse that my teammates are usually able to run onto the ball.

I pick up the ball on the left hand side of the pitch and drive, well more like wander, to the edge of the box. My shot comes back off the post, hits the keeper and bounces in.

It is given as an own goal. I am sure it crossed the line before it hit the keeper.

I know these lads do not want the game to become too competitive but surely there is room for a dubious goals panel, no?

Note:

I have written my feature for the Telegraph's online sport section, hence the SEO headline. I also believe the article would be well aimed at the Telegraph's slightly older target reader as the minimum age to play walking football is 50.

I chose the topic as I had previously known about the popular walking football club in Salisbury and had always wanted to see what the sport was like. When they accepted my request to come to a session, I found this debate over competition on message boards during my research.

People were discussing what leagues were around and I noticed that there was quite a bit of opposition to walking football being made competitive, with lots saying they just enjoyed playing for fun. I then decided to peg my story and ask people about the walking football People's Cup as it is being heavily advertised online at the moment.

Details of interviewees:

Chloe Buller -

Terry Rice -

Secondary material - <http://salisburywalkingfootball.org/faq>

(All other interviews were conducted at the walking football session)